



For Immediate Release

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**Dramatic Changes in Postsecondary Education Spark Analyses
Of the Changing “Ecology,” Needed Changes in Quality Assurance**

ALAMEDA, CALIF.—April 4, 2013—As low-cost, online providers, competency-based programs, and massive open online courses (MOOCs) change the landscape of higher education, “traditional” institutions also must respond to internationalization, new fiscal realities, and the “new majority” of faculty no longer holding full-time tenure track positions.

This “new ecology” for higher education means that accreditation leaders will need to continue to rethink their strategies for quality assurance as students participate in new kinds of learning experiences, access new kinds of learning resources, and deal with a broader range of providers than ever before.

In March, the U.S. Department of Education approved financial aid for students enrolled in self-paced learning programs. The aid would be based on measured competencies rather than credit hours. Meanwhile, Congress is pressuring all sectors of higher education to document students’ learning and other outcomes such as employment and admission to graduate programs. Academe also is scrambling to develop appropriate methods to assess and recognize learning in non-degree frameworks.

Today, WASC is releasing a series of white papers that describe current changes and trends that are likely to affect both higher education and accreditation. (*A list of authors and titles of their papers is attached.*)

“In commissioning the papers, we asked whether the focus of accreditation on institutions needs to shift in some ways to courses, or even to individual students,” says Ralph Wolff, president of WASC. “Many of these innovative practices call for increased attention on learning outcomes and the ability of both institutions and accreditors to assure the quality and integrity of learning, even as the locus, format, and arrangements of learning take on new forms.”

“Accreditors will need to perform a more overt accountability role, with processes more attuned to public concerns about quality,” notes Peter Ewell, vice president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS). “They will need to shift some of their attention toward monitoring how students progress longitudinally toward credentials, using the services of many educational providers. They must require even more emphasis to be placed on aligned standards of academic achievement as well as solid evidence that these standards are being achieved.”

“In the new ecosystem any approach to accreditation that does not draw a straight line from assessment to the value of a certificate or diploma is doomed,” notes Richard DeMillo, a professor of computing and management and director of the Center for 21st Century Universities at Georgia Tech.

In the papers, Individual authors call for:

- **Reviewing approaches to “unbundled” faculty roles.**
- **Paying closer attention to non-tenured faculty.** Adrianna Kezar, professor of education at the University of Southern California, urges clarification of faculty hiring/composition standards, adding non-tenure track faculty to accreditation teams, and being more explicit about policies for non-tenure-tracked faculty.
- **Expanding public representation on accrediting commissions.**
- **Determining the effectiveness of technology,** including whether technology is being used in ways that facilitate student learning, whether faculty receive appropriate training, and whether technology might be used to increase access and affordability.
- **Making review processes more cost-effective,** employing, where appropriate, more virtual communication and less paper-and-pencil reporting.
- **Partnering with and mutually recognizing the actions of quality assurance authorities in the rest of the world.**
- **Developing better metrics for MOOCs.** “WASC and other regional accreditors have not established guidelines that establish procedures and metrics for the educational effects of our activities,” notes Sebastian Thrun, founder and CEO of Udacity. “Given that millions of students are now participating in MOOCs, we believe that an urgency exists in developing such frameworks.”

In addition, papers drafted by representatives of for-profit institutions are calling on accreditors to give their institutions a bigger voice in decisions about educational quality.

These papers are available as a collection and individually on the WASC website at <http://www.wascsenior.org/redesign/conceptpapers>.

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The Western Association of Schools and Colleges Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities is one of seven regional higher education accrediting commissions recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. WASC ensures the quality, rigor, and integrity of colleges and universities granting bachelor’s and graduate-level degrees on behalf of more than a million students attending over 160 institutions.

Authors Included in the Series

Peter Ewell, vice president of NCHEMS, updated his 2010 paper, “The New ‘Ecology’ for Higher Education: Challenges to Accreditation,” which provides a comprehensive overview of these changes and their implications for accreditation.

Richard DeMillo, director, Center for 21st Century Universities and distinguished professor, Georgia Institute of Technology, offers a historical and comparative perspective on change in the 20th and 21st centuries in his paper, “New Ecosystems in Higher Education and What They Mean for Accreditation and Assessment.” He suggests that the current ecosystem is dramatically different, and a “standards-based approach” to accreditation is no longer workable.

Marina Gorbis, Devin Fidler, and Bettina Warburg-Johnson from the Institute for the Future describe the rapidly changing workplace where “traditional” jobs are being replaced with online enterprises that call for new skills and “learning flows” instead of traditional degrees in “From Educational Institutions to Learning Flows.”

Paul LeBlanc, president, Southern New Hampshire University, explores disruptive innovations in “Thinking about Accreditation in a Rapidly Changing World.” He describes how competency-based education provides a much needed alternative approach to learning, and at the same time could lead to the disaggregation of accreditation activities.

Sebastian Thrun, founder and CEO, Udacity, describes the innovative efforts undertaken by this path-breaking organization and the need for accreditation to be involved in assuring the quality and integrity of MOOC courses in “Changing Ecology: Towards Accreditation for Institutions Offering Courses, not Degrees.”

George L. Mehaffy, vice president, American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), describes institutional approaches to innovation in “AASCU’s Red Balloon Project.” The piece identifies innovations within traditional state universities that respond to fiscal challenges and new student characteristics.

Adrianna Kezar, professor of education, University of Southern California, provides a detailed overview of the new majority of non-tenure track faculty (NTTFs) and the impact of disaggregated faculty roles. She urges accreditation to more actively respond to these changes in “The New Ecology of Higher Education: The Changing Faculty.”

Denise DeZolt, chief academic officer, Laureate Education, describes the important role of for-profit institutions in meeting President Obama’s goals for expanding access. She also discusses the expansion of international education in “The Nexus of For-Profit, International, and Accreditation.”

Molly N. Lee, independent researcher recently with UNESCO, Bangkok, focuses on the changes occurring within higher education in the Asia-Pacific region in “New Ecology of Higher Education in Asia-Pacific: Implications for Accreditation.” Changes include new providers, new modes of financing, and new quality assurance systems.